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AUTHOR	Sapp, Gary L.; Abbott, Gypsy A.
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ABSTRACT

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RUNNING HEAD: SCHOOL-RELATED CHARACTERISTICS OF MALE JUVENILES

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School-Related Characteristics of Male Juveniles

Gary L. Sapp and Gypsy A. Abbott

University of Alabama at Birmingham

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'Send requests to Gary L. Sapp, Ed.D. The University of Alabama at Birmingham, School of Education, 901 South 13" Street, Room 203, Birmingham, AL 35294-1250

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Abstract

School-related characteristics of 256 male juveniles under the jurisdiction of a Family Court system were examined by perusing court records and conducting individual interviews with the juveniles. Results indicated that most juveniles last attended the eighth grade, more than 81% had failed at least once, and more than half had fought frequently at school. Assessment of cognitive ability using WISC-III and WAIS-R tests indicated that their Full Scales IQs fell in the Borderline to Low Average range, with less than 25% scoring in the Average range. The significance of school-related characteristics is discussed and implications for school reform are articulated.

School-Related Factors of Male Juveniles in a Family Court System

The quality of the school experience has been strongly linked to a youth's propensity to engage in delinquent behavior. Youth at high risk for delinquency often are identified by their violation of school rules. Truancy, suspension and expulsions are precursors of engagement in asocial behaviors (Kelly, Loeber, Keenan & DeLamatre, December, 1997). Those who subsequently engage in delinquent behaviors are four times more likely than their age mates to be suspended and/or expelled from school (Moore, Miller, Glei, & Morrison, 1995; Joseph, 1996). Conversely, number of years of schooling and level of academic achievement are negatively related to delinquency. Also, inappropriate educational placement and truancy may interact to contribute to delinquency. When students experience failure in classrooms, strong emotions of shame, fear, and anger may be engendered and avoidance tendencies follow. Much truancy could be prevented if school experiences, which are particularly traumatic for academically less able students, were congruent with students' developmental and cognitive levels (Farrington, 1987).

In a study conducted with 272 youths in an urban area in New Jersey, Joseph (1996) delineated school-related factors linked with delinquency. These included negative attitudes toward school, negative experiences in school, lowered educational expectations, lack of relevance of the curriculum, and lowered involvement in school activities. The strongest predictors of future delinquent behavior were low academic achievement, negative experiences in school-related situations, and lack of involvement in school activities.

Dropping out of school is another common problem of low-income children. They are three times more likely to drop out of school than are their middle-income peers and nine times more likely to drop out than their high-income peers. Only 65% of children from low-income families nationally graduate from high school, compared to 93% of children from high-income families. More than 25% of all low-income urban high schools in the United States present dropout rates of 50% or more, but only 1% of all other high schools have dropout rates of 50% or more (National Research Council on Education, 1993).

The relationship between one's level of cognitive functioning and the propensity to engage in deviant behavior is well established. "Low intelligence at ages eight to ten [has been found to be] one of the best independent predictors of juvenile convictions" (Farrington, 1987, p. 37). Intelligence and chronic delinquency are related to the degree that chronic offenders score about 10 IQ points lower than one-time offenders (Farrington, 1987)

The relationship between cognitive ability and delinquency was supported in a study comparing a school performance model of delinquency to a school reaction model (Ward and Tittle, 1994). The school performance model tests the assumption that intelligence indirectly influences delinquency through effects on successful participation in school. The implication is that if academic achievement could be systematically increased, the relationship between intelligence and delinquency would decrease substantially. The school reaction model posits a sequence of casual events so that lowered levels of cognitive ability influence academic achievement which eventuates in placement in classes for academically challenged youth. The placement results in lowered self-esteem and contributes to delinquent behavior."

The role of school performance and its relationships to delinquency was also supported in a study by Lynam, Moffitt, and Stouthamer-Loeber (1993). Using multivariate techniques they examined the impact of class, race, motivation, school failure, and self concept on the relationship between student IQs and their rate of delinquency. IQ was found to produce similar effects on school achievement for both Black and White youth. However, they obtained differential outcomes for Black and White youth finding that "IQ executed an effect on delinquency through school performance for black youth only" (p. 194). Lynam et al., (1993) suggest that school failure is a phenomenon of great significance for Black youth because schools provide a kind of "last ditch" defense for these youth. "Since the level of social control has broken down in many inter city neighborhoods, schools provide a source for this control lacking in the neighborhood" (p. 195).

The significance of these factors in the life of delinquent youth provided the impetus for this study. The primary purpose was to examine school-related characteristics of a sample of

males in the juvenile justice system who were referred for psychological evaluations. Primary variables selected for examination were grade attainment, grades failed, behavior problems, and cognitive ability.

Methodology

Sample

Subjects were 256 male juveniles under the jurisdiction of the Family Court in a mid-sized southeastern city. Subjects were assessed during a one-year period in 1995-1996. Ages ranged from 14 to 17 as violent offenders 16 and older were excluded from the sample and referred to the adult judicial system. Thus, this sample reflects a predominance of males in the 14-16 year old group. The racial composition was 54.6% African American, 15.9% Caucasian, and 28.7% race unidentified.

These subjects resided in a metropolitan are of 900,000 people while the majority lived in a central city of about 300,000 residents. The central city has a majority African American population, and ranks 4th, 12th, and 14th among all American cities in terms of infant mortality, overall crime, and violent crime respectively. Sixty percent of the children in the central city are eligible for free or reduced lunch (Birmingham Public Schools Data Files, 1998).

Academic achievement in the central city is a primary concern as a recent rating of schools by academic status using Stanford Achievement Test scores resulted in the designation of 38 of the systems 79 schools as being at risk. Twenty-five schools had Stanford Achievement test scores that fell below the 40th percentile and 13 had scores falling below the 23rd. It is also noteworthy that 14.3% of the students were receiving special education and related services.

In regards to the level of cognitive ability of the juveniles, comparative data is limited. The primary data sources available are studies conducted in the metropolitan area by the authors and their colleagues. (Sapp, Abbott, Hinkley, & Rowell, 1997) These outcomes are consistent with data obtained through group standardized testing. Intelligence test score obtained using the WISC-III suggest a depression in full scale IQs of about one-half to one standard deviation (15 points, Sapp, et al., 1997).

Data were obtained from records of the Family Court and from subjects' self reports. Cognitive ability scores were obtained during a mandatory psychoeducational evaluation conducted with all youth. Students completed either the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-III (WISC-III), administered to ages 6 - 16, or the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-Revised (WAIS-R), administered to those 16 years of age and older.

Results

Descriptive statistics were used to present subjects' school-related characteristics. These included frequencies, means, and standard deviations. Variables examined were grade attainment, grades repeated, behavior problems, and cognitive ability scores.

Examination of Table I indicates that 33.3% of subjects last attended the eighth grade. In many cases, this was their current grade, but, for some, it was the last grade for which they attended school. Data were unavailable for 50 juveniles (19.9%) of the sample.

Table I

Frequencies and Percentages of Highest Grade Attained

Grade	n	0.%
5	19	9.50
6	28	13.90
7	43	21.40
8	67	33.30
9	27	13.40
10	8	4.00
11	4	2.00
12	1	0.50

Table 2 presents data for those students reporting school failure. An astonishing 62.5% indicated that they had failed at least one grade; 26.5% had failed two grades, and 8.6% had failed three grades or more. These data were available for 151 juveniles. When asked to cite a reason for their lack of success 83% indicated they were "unsure" why they had failed. For those

citing reasons, 4% described their school work as "too hard;" 7% admitted to "not having tried," and 4% cited truancy.

Table 2

Number of Grades Failed

Number of Grades Failed	n	0%
0	28	18.5
1	68	62.5
2	40	26.5
3	13	8.6
4	2	1.3

Behavior problems were operationalized as fighting with peers in school and defiance to teachers. Information was gathered by self report from 155 youths. More than half of the youths (52.2%) reported having fought at school with some frequency and 73% participated in at least one fight annually. Thirty percent reported having been defiant with teachers and 50% engaged in disrespectful behavior to school authorities.

The Wechsler scales yield a Verbal, Performance, and Full Scale IQ. Examination of Table 3 indicates that the average WISC-III Verbal IQ was 74; the average Performance IQ was 78; and the average Full Scale IQ was 74. These scores fall in the Borderline range of intellectual functioning. Thus, the "average" juvenile referred for evaluation fell slightly above the cognitive level which is a primary indicator for placement in special education by the Alabama State Department of Education. The cognitive deficits of this sample are clearly indicated when the WISC-III subtest scores are examined. All verbal subtests (Information. Similarities, Arithmetic, Vocabulary, and Comprehension) are considered weaknesses when compared against the subtest average of 10 (s.d.= 3). These outcomes suggest that language development is delayed, knowledge of the larger culture is limited, and that many of these

juveniles either have little knowledge of or little regard for the rules and expectations of appropriate social behavior.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations For WISC-111 Scales and Subtests

Measure	WISC-III	
	M	SD
Information	5.87	3.28
Similarities	6.09	3.78
Arithmetic	6.16	3.04
Vocabulary	5.32	3.36
Comprehension	5.69	8.09
Picture Completion	6.57	4.30
Coding	6.09	3.68
Picture Arrangement	7.32	4.39
Block Design	6.21	4.04
Object Assembly	7.17	4.13
Verbal IQ	73.76	17.23
Performance IQ	77.44	18.18
Full Scale IQ	74.35	17.36

N = 167

For those who were administered the WAIS-R, average scores were slightly higher. The Verbal IQ was 81, Performance IQ was 83, and the Full Scale IQ was 80 (see Table 4). Contrary to the younger juveniles tested with the WISC-R, these youths would be classified as falling in the Low Average range. Subtests patterns also showed decrements in four of the five verbal subtests (Digit Span was not administered) as Information, Vocabulary, Arithmetic, and Comprehension were all considered substantial weaknesses. Scores on the Performance subtests were slightly higher and demonstrated more variability.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations For WAIS-R Scales and Subtests

Measure	WAIS-R	
	M	SD
Information	5.14	2.64
Picture Completion	6.95	2.73
Picture Arrangement	7.38	3.21
Vocabulary	5.14	1.97
Block Design	7.41	2.79
Arithmetic	6.24	2.24
Object Assembly	6.97	2.84
Comprehension	5.62	2.16
Digit Symbol	7.59	2.77
Similarities	6.97	1.86
Verbal IQ	81	15
Performance IQ	83	17.90
Full Scale IQ	80	12.90

N = 47

Table 5 presents the relative frequencies of the average IQs for both the WISC-III and WAIS-R. These results are illuminating, indicating that comparatively few of the total group (24.4 %) fell within the average range of intellectual functioning. These outcomes present a group that is substantially at risk. This comparative lack of cognitive development would negatively impact these juveniles' chances to pursue jobs that provide a sustaining income.

Table 5

Frequencies of WISC-III and WAIS-R IQ Scores

	WISC-III	WAIS-R	
Full Scale IQ	n	n	%
Greater than 85	41	14	24.4
70-84	75	22	43.1
55-69	43	5	21.4
Less than 55	25		11.1

N = 225

Discussion

These data provide a profile of a "typical" juvenile offender, a male enrolled in the middle school grades who has failed at least one grade, and who obtains a cognitive ability score which places him as in the Borderline to Low Average range. They are congruent with those data reported elsewhere (Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996; Joseph, 1996; Sapp et al., 1997) and lend support to the significance of the variables addressed in this study.

The demonstrated relationship between school-related factors and delinquency (Lynam et al., 1993) suggests that early intervention during the elementary school years would contribute toward a substantial reduction in subsequent delinquent activities. Unfortunately, students in the Borderline range of intellectual functioning often fail to receive appropriate assistance in school because their ability levels are considered too high for eligibility for special education services. Their capability to succeed in a traditional, group-based, traditional classroom is often compromised by their lowered levels of cognitive ability, delayed language development, lack of knowledge about the larger culture, poor study skills, and lowered motivation to achieve. The resultant school failure often results in feelings of marginalization, rejection, apathy, and disinterest in school activities.

These outcomes suggest that school system personnel should re-examine their relationships with students who present with the characteristics delineated in this study. Ignoring the problem and failing to ameliorate student learning difficulties and behavior problems invites delinquent behavior. School system goals should include an increased emphasis on early identification of students with learning problems, a reassessment of instructional activities and the development of intervention programs that have relevance and meaning. At-risk students generally benefit from smaller class sizes in which hands-on activities as well as guided discovery learning experiences are provided (Joseph, 1996). These students would be least likely to benefit from a traditional school experience in which the teacher "tells" the students what is to be learned. As recommended in the *National Science Standards (1996),* the paradigm shift to active learning with "hands-on, minds-on" experiences is more likely to motivate these students and to assist

them in meeting their academic potential. Educational strategies which result in students remaining in school also will continue to be an important focus (Joseph, 1996).

Another significant activity is the provision for conflict resolution strategies and peer mediation within the structure of the school. When 50% of a sample of juveniles admit to fighting at school it is a major concern. Most of these youth were of middle school age, which suggests that conflict resolution strategies should be introduced during the elementary school years.

The pervasive influence of poverty, deteriorating neighborhoods and lack of positive role models, is difficult to overcome. However, issues which children from low socioeconomic backgrounds bring to their school environment must be addressed, if they are to experience success in school. Schools can provide powerful strategies to prevent delinquency, particularly if they manifest the will to engage in steps lending to urban school reform These include hiring qualified teachers, dealing with the anguish and anger of students and teachers (p. xv), preventing systematic abuse of students by school staff, changing antiquated policies, and providing sufficient resources for schools (Anyon, 1997). Perhaps the most critical factor is mobilizing the political will of the members of the community to demand educational excellence for their children.

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